

Alton Debate: the Road to Racial Equality

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The Civil War, one of the most important events in America history, impacted the country enormously; however even before a shot was fired, the northern and southern states debated the moral justification of slavery. Illinois became a key state in deciding which party would control the U. S. Senate. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates influenced the decision. At this time, Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, fought for Illinois to become a free-state, while Stephen A. Douglas, a Democrat, initially wanted it as a slave state. This campaign was divided into seven debates. Even though Lincoln lost the senatorial election, it was clear that Lincoln benefited more from the debates. It was during the Alton debate, the final one, that Lincoln exposed views that questioned Douglas' political stance, costing Douglas the presidential election two years later.

Prior to the debates, Lincoln and Douglas had already been developing their political careers. According to W. D. Armstrong, president of the 1930 Madison County Historical Society, "In 1858 Senator Douglas reached the zenith of his wonderful career... At this time Abraham Lincoln had won little national renown, but his star was slowly rising." Douglas initially gathered support for advocating slavery and supported acts such as the Missouri Compromise which would admit more states into the nation as a slave state. In contrast, Lincoln was clearly a critic of slavery, disapproving documents like the Missouri Compromise and instead advocated decisions in admitting more states into the Union. Furthermore, Lincoln opposed the secession of states from the country as reflected in his famous quote "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Ultimately,

this showed that Lincoln advocated the United States remaining whole and completely devoid of slavery, an idea which greatly contrasts with Douglas'. Although both Lincoln and Douglas had very unique experiences, it was clear that they were both formidable speakers and fierce opponents. Because each candidate held very different opinions on slavery, their contrasting opinions created one of the most controversial debates and it became one of the most significant events in American history.

The Alton debate occurred on October 15, 1858, when the candidates had just finished speaking at Quincy, Illinois, two days earlier. According to the observers of the Alton debate, "Not only was his (Douglas') voice 'completely shattered' by the long campaign he also looked 'bloated' and 'haggard' to one observer... By contrast, Lincoln looked as fresh as if he had just entered the campaign." Nevertheless, both candidates were exhausted in some form from the previous six debates, making it easier for them to damage their own senatorial campaign. Despite the exhaustion, Lincoln managed to finish the final debate without making any serious mistakes; however, Douglas was not as successful. Coming into these debates, Douglas' campaign had been built on the belief that he was an obstinate pro-slavery candidate. However during the debates, he altered this position by saying "if this abolition doctrine... had prevailed, it would have established slavery as a permanent institution, in all the states whether they wanted it or not" suggesting that this was an example of the government "enforcing a doctrine on a majority" a pro-sovereignty stance as opposed to his initial pro-slavery campaign.

When the debate started, Douglas spoke first and recapitulated the topics discussed in the six previous debates, which insignificantly damaged Lincoln's campaign. As soon as Douglas finished speaking, Lincoln immediately began his speech by saying

“I have been somewhat... complimented by a large portion of Judge Douglas’ speech...he devotes to the controversy between himself and the present Administration.” This reveals that Lincoln had discovered several mistakes that Douglas had just made during the previous speech. Lincoln brought up the point that Douglas had initially supported the “repeal of the Missouri Compromise, it has been but a little while since he was the valiant advocate of the Missouri Compromise,” which means that prior to the debates, Douglas was a strong supporter of the existence of slavery in *all* states.

However, during this recent speech, Douglas focused more on letting the people decide the issues as opposed to his initial support for a pro slavery government. Although Douglas’s pro-sovereignty platform attracted its own supporters and would initially become a strong argument during these debates, this altercation later backfired when both Douglas’ opponents and supporters accused him of being a candidate with inconsistent beliefs. These flaws that Lincoln revealed became key factors which contributed to Douglas’ downfall. Ultimately, the Alton debate was not significant for what Douglas had mentioned in his speech; rather it is important because of the impact the questions and accusations that Lincoln presented had on future events.

Lincoln had spoken exceptionally well during the debates; however, it was Douglas who won the seat in the U. S. Senate. Today, it is still believed that despite Lincoln’s superior performance in the debates, because Douglas was better known to the public prior to the debates, he received the votes from those who remained loyal to him despite his mistakes during the debates. Despite Douglas’ victory, the Alton debate had placed Douglas in a dangerous political position with many of Lincoln’s accusations left unanswered. These unanswered questions “labeled him (Douglas) indifferent to slavery

rather than an advocate of it and the party (Democratic) split in 1860” according to Darryl Short. As several months passed between the debate and the coming presidential election, Douglas’ political position and influence over the Democratic Party had declined, while Lincoln had been requested to speak at various events that promoted his political popularity. While support for Douglas waned, it became clear, Short went on, that “Lincoln, on the other hand, only gained from the debates” and in 1860 received the Republican presidential nomination. Eventually, Lincoln became the sixteenth president of the United States.

Ultimately, the Alton debate helped shape America. Although Lincoln lost the debates, the lasting effects of the Alton debate helped contribute to his gradual rise in popularity and political power. This rising popularity enabled Lincoln to run for the 1860 presidency effectively, thus influencing the outcome of the Civil War. Lincoln’s presidency caused the Union’s victory during war, abolished slavery, which eventually led to the racial equality that exists today. Undoubtedly, without Lincoln’s participation in the Alton debate, the modern racial equality that is present today would not exist.

[From Stephen [Douglas, Speech. Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Alton Town Square, Alton, Illinois. Oct. 15, 1858. <http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm>](http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm) (Sept. 6, 2007); Harold [Holzer, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the First Complete Unexpurgated Text*; Abraham Lincoln, Speech. Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Alton Town Square, Alton, Illinois. Oct. 15, 1858. <http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm>](http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm) (Sept. 6, 2007); and Darryl [Short, "Lincoln Had Many Ties to Alton." *Bluff City Profiles: Alton, Illinois, 1837-1987.*](http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates.htm)]